

REDUCTION OF POSTAGE, &c.

MEMORIAL

OF

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF ILLINOIS,

PRAYING

*A reduction in the rate of letter postage; and showing the evils and gross injustice, as well as the injudicious policy, of the present rates of postage.*

MARCH 8, 1844.

Referred to the Committee on the Post Office and Post Roads.

*Resolved by the House of Representatives, (the Senate concurring herein,) That the following memorial be adopted, and that each of our Senators and Representatives be furnished with a copy of the same :*

In behalf of our constituents, the people of the State of Illinois, we recommend to the especial attention of the national legislature that subject of general complaint—the high rate of postage on letters. In this young State, we feel, in a peculiar manner, that inconvenience which operates with so much severity upon thousands of our citizens who are remotely separated from their early friends. There seems to be a necessity for exempting, by law, a class of public agents from this burden; but, were it not deemed inconsistent with a just regard to legislative convenience to restrict the franking privilege to the executive department of the Government alone, such restriction would lead irresistibly to a clearer apprehension of the inconvenience to which the mass of the people are exposed by the present exorbitant charges for letter postage. Those who are exempt by law, or whose ample means place them above the consideration of small expenses, can with difficulty be made to sympathise with that large, intelligent, industrious, and deserving portion of society, who suffer under this abuse, and to whom the benefit of our extended mail arrangements is virtually prohibited.

To show the extremity of this inconvenience during the present unusual dearth of money, it may be useful to advert to a fact of frequent occurrence in this State. Letters have been inquired for at the post office, and seen by the person to whom they were directed, who has then endeavored to raise the money to meet the postage, without success; and they have eventually gone to the department among the dead letters. Cruel incidents of this description are common at every post office, and in all parts of our country; the high rate of postage, in every quarter, repressing correspondence, and amongst

a valuable portion of society prohibiting it altogether. It would seem to wear the character of not only a practical absurdity, but of a high-handed abuse, to establish, for the express convenience of the public, an institution which affords accommodation to a limited few, while the mass of the people are not only too poor to reap any substantial benefit from it, but are prohibited from devising any scheme of their own to accomplish the object which this monopoly fails to effect. Private enterprise might accomplish, with equal certainty and speed, for the whole people, what the department now accomplishes for a limited portion only. It is well known that letters are constantly transported, and in vast numbers, between our great Atlantic cities, by private enterprise. Under a just and reasonable rate of postage, this successful competition with the public mail could never succeed.

Some idea may be formed relative to the extravagance of the present charges for letter postage, by advertg to calculations made in England previous to a recent experiment adopted there under a greatly diminished rate. It was found that about one-thirty-sixth part of a penny on each letter weighing one-quarter of an ounce, would defray the cost of carrying the mail between Edinburgh and London, four hundred miles. This calculation led to the very important reform of establishing a uniform charge upon every single letter transported by mail, without regard to distance. To quote the words of the British report, "If the charge for postage be made proportionate to the whole expense in the receipt, transit, and delivery of the letter, and in the collection of its postage, it must be made uniformly the same from every post-town to every other post-town in the United Kingdom, unless it can be shown how we are to collect so small a sum as the thirty-sixth part of a penny." It admits of demonstration that the expense of transporting a letter by mail between the most distant points of the United States is less than one cent.

Whilst these facts show the enormity of the existing charges, they cannot fail to demonstrate the propriety of a uniform charge on each letter transported by mail, without regard to distance; and that, in establishing such charge, our smallest silver coin, the half dime, should be the maximum. When it is considered that a vast amount of correspondence by letter is effected on our great thoroughfares through the medium of private conveyance—which would seek the public mail in preference, were the charges less exorbitant—and that an immense portion of our population are nearly cut off from such communication by the present high rate, it may not be unreasonable to say that the uniform charge of five cents for the postage of a single letter would yield more to the department than it now receives, whilst the object of its institution would be more fully accomplished.

Relative to the franking privilege, the additional expense to the department on that account is probably overrated; but, so far as the public service is concerned, it would seem more just to provide for such expense through the ordinary channel of appropriation, than to extort any portion of it so directly from the hard earnings of the laborious emigrant. That decidedly just and salutary feature in the English reform, which determines the charge of postage on a sealed package by weight, without regard to the number of pieces enclosed, should not be overlooked.

Our present method of prying into letters by postmasters and clerks, although countenanced by law, is not only unjust, but exceedingly impertinent. It is a practice so revolting to all manly and correct feeling, that many

of our postmasters can never condescend to be made the tool of the department in carrying out a system of espionage which they consider so disreputable, and so little called for by the public interest. How infinitely unworthy the magnanimous spirit of a great nation to require that our public servants shall tear open the envelope of a suspected pamphlet or newspaper, to see that the treasury is not about to be despoiled of its due, by the information surreptitiously conveyed that somebody's "friends are well!" How much is annually saved to the nation by this gross assault upon the proprieties of life? or how should it be expected that laws which sanction such rudeness can be respected by a free people? A reform which would be moderate and limited, compared with that which has met favor in England, might result in the following advantages:

1. A price more equivalent to the service rendered would be established.

2. The odium attached to the public conveyance, as an exorbitant Government monopoly, would be removed; and the inducements to private enterprise to compete with it be reduced, if not destroyed.

3. The charge for letter postage would be uniform as well as just; the accounts more readily kept, and the duties of the post office more correctly and economically performed.

4. The people would acquire the habit of resorting wholly to the use of the public mail, and the increased correspondence would prove at least an equivalent to the reduction upon the rate of postage; which rate, if fixed at five cents, would still exceed, by more than tenfold, the actual mean cost of the receipt, transit, and delivery of the letter.

5. A large, deserving, and most useful portion of community, which is now cruelly and unjustly debarred from the use of this important conveyance by the present exorbitant rates of letter postage, would reap that benefit from the public transportation of the mail to which every citizen is justly entitled.

6. The greatly augmented correspondence would facilitate commercial arrangements, yield an incalculable addition to social enjoyment, and more essentially promote the object of general education than any other means within the reach of the Federal Government; and we may here be permitted to remark, that, whilst millions are annually expended in imparting literary and scientific knowledge to the rising generation, the adult mind should also be enlightened, or the guardians of youth can feel no interest in an object so important. Communication by letter is the special province of mature years; and, to a reflecting mind, the importance of promoting an interchange of ideas by written correspondence, as a means of inducing a habit of correct thought—of classifying, extending, and putting human knowledge to the best use—may be deemed a consideration of sufficient magnitude to demand some attention among the duties of legislation.

7. By regulating the postage on sealed packages by weight, instead of the present very objectionable method, by the number of enclosures, we should not only give a more equitable rate with increased uniformity and simplicity, but the discreditable practice of prying into sealed packages, so offensive to the public, and often so fatally demoralizing to the agent who performs that duty, would be wholly superseded.

